

STORY BY MASTER SGT. JACK BRADEN • PHOTO BY SENIOR AIRMAN CHRISTOPHER GRIFFIN

FINALLY FINDING A 'FAVORITE STORY'

Photojournalists dream of the story that becomes more than just another assignment. I have been asked what my favorite story is many times during my career. My answer is normally "all of them in their own way."

After 23 years, I can finally say I have a favorite story. Covering Operation Arctic Care 2010 in one of the most remote places on earth, northwest Alaska. From the purpose of the mission, to the team my team embedded with, to the villagers themselves, this assignment was almost storybook, and I hope the imagery I captured conveys the emotion and amazement that I experienced on this trip. I can honestly say this assignment became one I'll never forget.

Staff Sgt. Paul Croxon was the writer on this trip, as well as comic relief. Going in, we had preconceived ideas about what to expect in Alaska while covering OAC. Some things were valid: it's cold; it snows; the villages are remote; and the scenery is breathtaking. What we didn't expect was the warmth and openness of everyone we met.

After arrival in Kotzebue, Alaska, our staging point, we missed the first movement of the traveling medical team. I don't think they expected to return to Kotzebue until the end of the operation, and we knew if we couldn't find them the story wouldn't be as strong.

The traveling team consisted of doctors and medics across a broad spectrum of specialties. Their job was to travel from village to village augmenting the medical teams permanently assigned to each village.

To complicate matters, the weather would not cooperate so we could move forward to a village to get the story firsthand. Little did we know we would run in to the travel team after four days in Kotzebue.

They had come back to help with school physicals. I'm convinced fate was involved in bringing them back. We found out by chance and immediately started coordination to embed with them. From that point on, everything fell into place as if there was divine intervention in getting the story told.

The medical team we traveled with was absolutely incredible; their immediate openness and the way they accepted Sergeant Croxon and me is rarely seen.

Nine near-strangers from across the country and from different services accepted the challenge to be without a permanent home for two weeks, coming together in one of the best teams I have ever seen.

Normally when we connect with potential story subjects, there is a little bit of hesitation and distance before we're accepted and fit in. This team accepted us as part of their team right from the moment we showed up and made telling the Operation Arctic Care story very easy.

In Noorvik, our first village, we met an amazing man, Clarence Jackson, a village elder. He's 92 years old, still builds dogsleds by hand, and has a teenager's sense of humor. Our podiatrist, Cmdr. Jeffrey Johnson, visited Mrs. Jackson to check her for diabetes-related issues. After the house call, Mr. Jackson agreed for Sergeant Croxon and me to interview him and his wife. During the next 40 minutes Mr. Jackson gave us a brief history of the Eskimo people and some of the challenges they have faced. On several occasions he made references to his wife of 58 years who giggled as if still in grade school.

When asked if there was anything the military could do that isn't being done, Mr. Jackson, without hesitation, said we should "bring our families to visit."

Our last day in Noorvik, we visited Edith and Thomas Pungalik, also village elders who love to entertain guests. They invited everyone to their house for dinner. The spread was amazing. For those of us who had hopes of possibly trying local food, Edith's home-cooked feast fulfilled that dream far beyond anything we could have

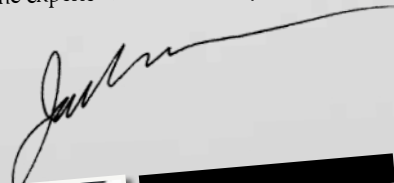
expected. She spent all day preparing sheefish chowder, muktuk (whale blubber), caribou, a mix of fresh salmon berries, donuts, fresh rolls and a lot more. For the record, muktuk isn't near as bad as people make it sound. I actually had two pieces.

Edith informally adopted all of us and offered an open invitation to come back and visit any time.

The kids in the villages loved having their pictures taken and always had questions. When we walked down the street they would come and talk to us and ask to have their picture taken. The only thing they wanted was to see it on the back of the camera and they were happy as could be. I must say, Paul is a bit of a kid magnet. It seemed like every building we walked in to, kids would run up and give him a hug and start climbing on him.

I think what amazed me most on this trip is how the Eskimo people are still able to hang on to much of their culture, living off the land, crafts, making use of everything at their disposal and the pride the elders have when talking about their heritage. They are probably the most welcoming people I have ever met.

As this issue hits the streets, I'm entering the last five months of my military career and I feel very privileged to have had the chance to capture the imagery of Operation Arctic Care 2010. I found that elusive favorite story. The experience will definitely stay with me.




Master Sgt. Jack Braden looks for photographic opportunities while covering Operation Arctic Care in Northwest Alaska. MSgt Braden has covered stories all over the world during his 23-plus years as an Air Force photographer.